

TALBOT SMITH AND THE SERVANT PROBLEM

By
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TALBOT SMITH had lately built the newest half-timbered house and a chalet-like garage in Pelham Heights. As a third partner in the firm of Beauregard, Wallingham, Smith, Beauregard and Jones, he had the income for these things. And Mrs. Talbot had the looks to carry them. In a black velvet dinner-gown she looked so surpassingly well that thereafter, young Joseph Jones, one of the flippant junior partners, expressed himself as believing Mrs. Talbot Smith the very prettiest woman in the world. In the opinion of Joseph, all was very snug with Talbot S.

Yet there had been times when Joseph had remarked in his senior an unspoken worryment, an affliction which he brought with him to the Liberty Street office in the morning which passed away under the invigorating stress of business, and then came back again when he turned his face commutively homewards.

And finally there came a morning when Joseph leaned over the desk of that elder brother in the firm and with feeling laid his hand upon his arm.

"Talbot S.," he said, "the time has come for you to tell me what the trouble is. Is some secret grief wringing your azure chord? Or is it merely the good old wolf sitting at that Pergolesi portico, which you allege to be a door?"

"Oh," said Talbot Smith, "it's just the confounded, world-without-end servant problem!"

"Just lost 'em all?"

"Oh, no. We lost them all last week, and we've just filled our hand again. But they've all got to learn their jobs; and by the time they've learned, there'll be another flare up, and it'll be all off again!"

"Talbot S.," said Joseph, "this time not merely with feeling but with conviction, 'by a good fortune which you in no way deserve, it happens that you've brought your piteous plaint to perhaps the one person in America who can help you out. The servant problem is something I've thought to a finish. I often wake up at nights and think about it. Being a single man, too, and never having had any servants, I can think wholly without bias. And I know exactly where you've all gone wrong. Look here! Did you ever hit any servant problem in the good old English novel, from Fielding to Trollope? No. And why? Because there they chuckled 'em under the chin! They said: 'A dem' pretty gal, egad! They asked 'em where they got their rosy cheeks—and who that happy-looking young man was they saw 'em walking out with Sunday last?'"

Talbot Smith's much corrugated brow smoothed out a little.

"Well, Lord, now, I suppose—"

"But have you ever done that? No, I'll bet mining stocks, or even real money, that you haven't. I'll swear you leave the whole thing to Mrs. Talbot, as if it were within gunshot of possible for one woman to be able to boss another! No, no, Tabby, no, no! Try the kindlier, try the better way."

"Well, by Jove, now!" said Smith. "I know you're not conscious of it, Joey, but there may be a good deal in that, a good deal. I've thought along those lines myself, you know. A little appreciation, a little harmless jolly, you know. It might really work."

"It might really work?" repeated Joseph. "It might really work? Oh, well!" He gave up, gathered in two cigars, which his senior had rashly left within clutching distance, and returned to his own room.

Yet in the soul of Talbot Smith a new seed had been planted. A very legitimate doubt of any "wisdom" that came from Joseph J. kept it for some days below the ground. But the ground was being slowly moved and lifted.

It was rather a matter of conscience with T. S., too. He had long felt that it was not quite square to let Isabel take the whole burden in these afflictions. And what had been merely the shyest of contemplated projects grew, with increase of boldness, into a generous though unconfessed determination.

II.

Nor, indeed, was Talbot Smith in any wise a fool. For example, there was no slightest danger of his attempting to chuck anybody under the chin. He did not precisely take Isabel into his confidence. He thought it best not to do that until he could begin to show results. But he asked her privily if, this time, she was doing anything to keep the bunch.

The question made her stare at him. "Why, what would or could I do? If they like it, they'll stay. If they don't they won't. I should think, dear, that by this time you'd understand that yourself."

And this response seemed, to Talbot Smith's masculine and legal mind, to be insufficient both in logic and in policy. Next morning—he was breakfasting alone—he took occasion to say to Regina that the coffee was mighty good.

Regina was a timid, floury-complexioned German girl. And in the matter of English she was as yet rather timid in the up-take. She looked at him nervously, and he repeated the remark.

And though she understood then, yet she still appeared to doubt. When she went back into the kitchen he could hear her saying something to old Katy, the cook. And, after a silence, Katy herself came to the door, stood a moment, and then slowly tilted her head through. With that peculiar fixity of countenance which, in the truly Irish, means both dubiety and danger, she gazed in upon him.

"Regina tells me ye been sayin' somethin' about the coffee?"

"Why, yes, I was saying it was mighty good coffee; the best I've tasted in a dog's age. How d'you make it?"

"Why, sure I'm makin' it as the missus told me, wit' the Frinch drip."

"Well, now," said Smith, "it reminds me of the way we used to have it when we were camping up in Maine. Only the way we did was to put the coffee into straight cold water, and let it come just to a boil."

"'Yis, an' manny's the hoondred times I've made good coffee that way meself, now!" said Katy. And beaming broadly, she withdrew to get him his bacon and eggs.

Although Talbot S. was hardly conversant with such details, that particular day brought Regina her afternoon off. He had returned from New York a little early himself; and thus he met her at the local station as he was coming out.

She was with a cumbersome Teutonic yokel, who, when Smith raised his hat, showed himself several times more bashful even than Regina was herself. But he possessed a clear, baby-blue eye, and that species of

read all those at the other end," he said. "Wouldn't you like to take a bundle of them back to your room?"

The astonished radiance with which she accepted the offer allowed him to go a little further even. He showed her how she could remove the metal binder and then take out the colored pictures for mural decorations.

After that Bertha was the easiest conquest of them all. Whereas old Katy was now sending in, some seven times a day, to ask if the steak was broiled right, and the master's muffins were to his taste—and Regina could with difficulty remember to serve the lady first.

The end of the month—the critical period—had passed, and there appeared to be rather less likelihood of any of the three leaving that house in Pelham Heights than there was of its possessors abandoning it themselves.

Indeed, it seemed somewhat strange to Talbot S. that the new condition of things had not ere this come home to Isabel. He did not wish to have to offer her the explanation. He wished her to ask for it. He had rather counted upon her noticing those magazine pictures when she made her weekly in-

face smiled out like some rural German flower bed. Her sense of the fitness of things compelled her to refuse, for "Heinie," for a time. But it was only for a time. "He has never in an automobile of his life been," she said. "Und, ach, what for a thing to put in the Christmas letter to the Vater in Greitstein!"

A few minutes later Regina stood in the chill November moonlight bidding her man-to-be good-night with little ecstatic squeezes of the arms. The gentleman in the big, oily gloves lifted his head from the crank, caught the tongue-clogged yearning in Heinie's heavy face, and suddenly he had another and a more radically generous thought! Why shouldn't Regina help see her swain home as well?

And waving away all her tremulously fluttered refusals, he gave her only a brace of jiffies to get her things on.

Coming back, the tonneau was manifestly too big for only one, and Regina was compelled to get in beside the giver of the treat. When she did not sit gathered together in a silence which was even more eloquent than colloquial German she was for the twentieth time trying to convey to "Herr Schmidt" some of the absolute wonder and magnificence of that evening's excursion!

Solving the servant problem! It was too easy. It was like taking pennies from the helpless blind!

When he was nearing the house, for a moment Talbot S. had an idea that he saw a head at Isabel's window. Yet when he went into her room she did not answer, and thus manifestly, she was asleep. He would tell her about his evening at the breakfast table.

She did not come down, however, till he was just about to leave. He began to lead up to the matter. But she showed that she was not listening. Hitherto she had not been able to see. Now she seemed unable even to hear. If he had not known Isabel so thoroughly it would almost have made him uncomfortable.

IV.

That day the first warm, mellowing winds of Indian summer descended upon Broadway, and Talbot S. determined to shunt the office at the noon hour. This time Isabel should go motoring whether or no. The afternoon was too superlatively good to be blighted by all the woman's clubs in America.

He found Regina and Bertha standing nervously in the lower hall. And from a door in the rear Katy showed a face that was decidedly aghast.

Isabel was upstairs. Two closed trunks blocked the way outside her door, and, with a speed that was vibrant, she was putting things into a third, her big Saratoga.

"Great Scott!" he said. "What under the dome are you doing?"

"I think you can see very well."

"But where—where the deuce are you starting for?" "I think you might almost be able to guess that, too. I'd hoped to be gone before you returned. But apparently there was something that brought you home early!"

The shipping tags dangled only too plainly in his view. They read: "Mrs. Willa Cameron, Ridgewood, New Jersey." And Mrs. Willa Cameron was the mother of Isabel.

"There's a letter for you on your desk," she said—"if you think it's worth your reading."

He went into his own room, came back with the letter, and then, with a bedazzlement which was fast becoming anger, he threw it upon the chiffonier.



"FOR WE'LL BE AHL WOMEN ALONE HERE NOW."

rustic stoutness which suggests honest virtue as much as ample feeding. And, through her blushes, one could see that Regina's pride in him was altogether fondly immeasurable.

About ten that night Smith went down to the pantry to rummage for some biscuits and cheese—a practice which still stayed with him from a not too distant boyhood—and thereby he caused Regina to enter with great abruptness through the outside kitchen door.

Patently, she had been saying good-night to some one.

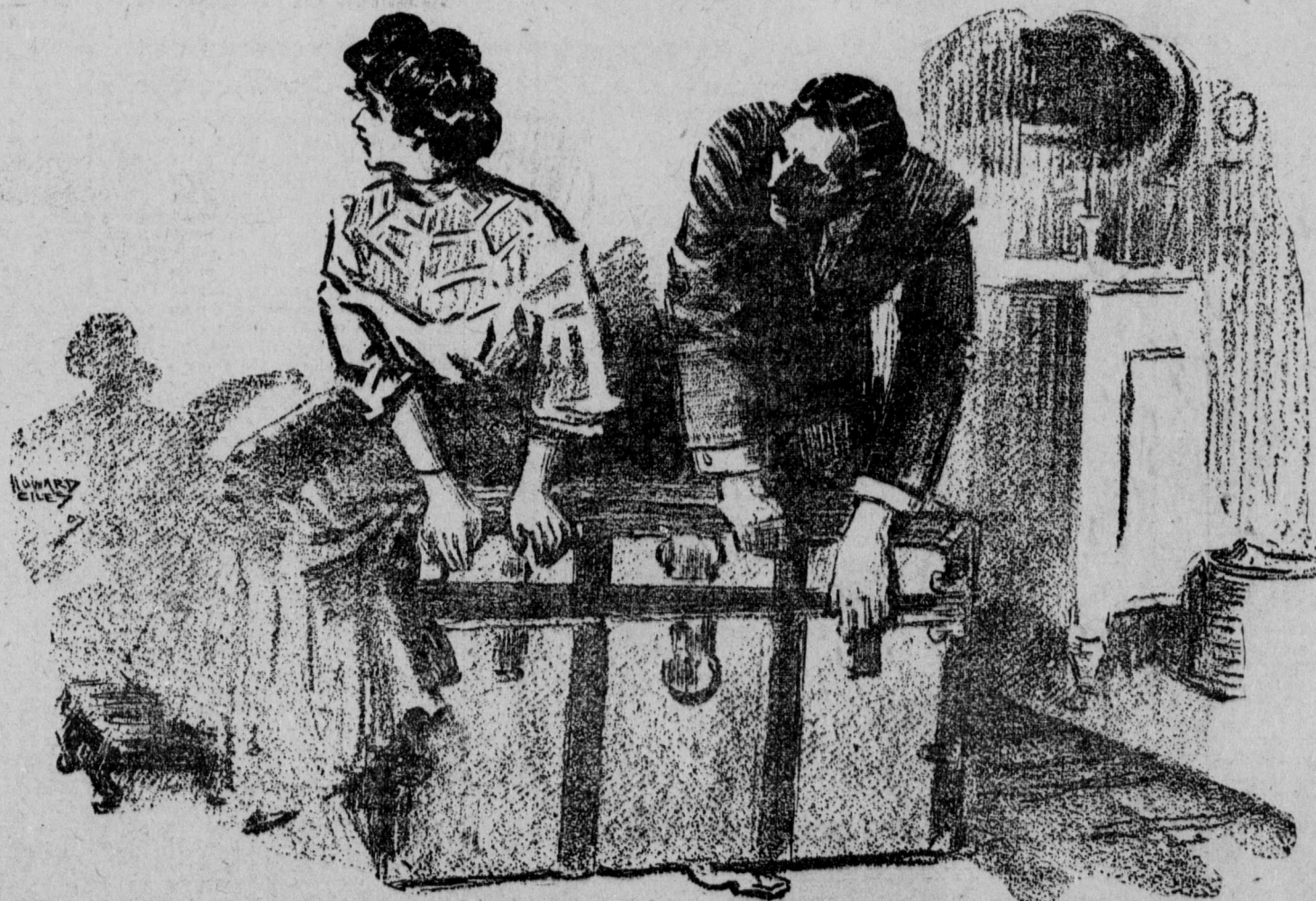
He looked at her, much delighted, and asked "If he heisst Heinrich oder Hans?"

"Heinrich," she answered, with gaping astonish-

spection of the domestic quarters, and so bringing the matter up through that. But apparently Bertha had not hung the pictures as yet. Furthermore, he had several times observed that Isabel did not seem to be quite herself of late. In any case he would not bring it up himself until he could be absolutely certain of the success of his campaign.

III.

Remembering that she did not appear to be quite herself, on Thursday evening of that week he asked her if she wouldn't like a little spin down to Harlem. But she answered without that nicety of appreciation which is the peculiar perfume of wifehood, that she would prefer to spend the evening on some club business with Mrs. Atkinson. He walked about the house



"BUT, BY GAD, YOU KNOW," HE GASPED, "THIS BEATS THE VERY JIM-JAMS."

ment. "Who has told you?"

"Oh, nobody, nobody! But when a man's as good-looking as that, he's always called either Hans or Heinrich. No other way to it!"

"Und he is good, also," she whispered avertingly but radiantly, and slipped away to the back stairs.

It sent Talbot S. up to the library again with a feeling which no mere success of policy has any right to bestow.

Bertha, the up-stairs maid, was much less easy of approach, because she was native born, and had had the beginnings of an education. But the opening came the following afternoon when she came up to his den to remove his waste-paper basket and straighten the magazine shelves. At the latter she looked with a most obvious longing.

It was his chance, and he rose to it at once. "We've

lonesomely for awhile. Then, perhaps with a feeling that he would have less of his own company behind the steering post than in his den, he decided to go out alone.

When he had got the car around to the side door, he remembered that he had left most of his tools on his work bench down in the basement. To get them he had, much against his will, to pass the trysting place of Regina and Heinrich.

The worthy young Teuton was just about to take his departure.

"He has work by night, now," Regina explained. "He must at half of ten beginnin'." Heinrich made a bashful duck.

"That so?" said Talbot Smith; "which way are you going? Can't I give you a lift?"

Regina first looked almost frightened. Then her

"Yes," she said, "treat it as you've been treating me!"

"But I don't need any letter from you! And what's more, I'm not reading any! What in misery's got you, anyway?"

She had finished packing the trunk, and she now attempted to close it. But, as always, the "old sock-dollager" would not close.

He stood staring at her, rubbing himself behind the ears.

Again, by force of pressure, she tried to make the haps come to their appointed grooves. But they would not. She flung back the lid and brought it down with a feverish jerk. It jammed at the hinges, jarred her to the soles of her feet, and she could now neither get it up nor down. As they had learned long ago, the "sockdollager" called for dual control. Unless she was to work herself a serious injury there

was only one thing for him to do. He must go to her aid.

He threw his weight upon the lid and snapped one haps into place while she made fast the other. "But, by gad, you know," he gasped, "this beats the very jim-jams!"

Her hat, veil and cloak lay on the couch in the inner room. She swept into them, and began, with unspeaking rapidity to put them on.

"If you would offer even half a syllable of explanation," he said.

"Explanation! As if it wasn't I who had a right to an explanation! Though don't think for a moment that I'd listen to one now! As if for a month back you hadn't been deliberately slighting me in every possible way for—yes, for the very servants!"

"Isabel! I take it for granted that when, purely as a matter of wisdom I speak to old Katy—"

"Yes, as a matter of wisdom! Yesterday morning you'd got the length of calling her an angel," she burst surgingly back upon him. "I'll just ask you when, last, you called me an angel?"

Talbot S. retreated rapidly behind the "old sock-dollager." Well, dear, I will! I'm sure it's—it's been the merest oversight! I'll call you—"

"You'd better! You even whisper it!—and after yesterday evening, too!"

At that Mr. Talbot Smith began to be good and angry himself. "I suppose you've gone to work and discharged them all, by way of making everything lovely?"

"I've done nothing whatever. You shall be the one to do, after this! Oh, I'm leaving you with full responsibility!"

There was a sound of wheels stopping in front of the door, and an expressman came up the stairs. Mrs. Talbot was already indicating what trunks were to be taken. To have attempted any further intervention now would have been to invite the expressman into the scene. And Talbot S. had that masculine instinct which, from the soul, abhors a scene, even when it is confined to the party of the first part and the party of the second.

Also as soon as that expressman had felt the weight of the "sockdollager" he gave him the deadly, bulldog eye, and he had to help him down the stairs with it.

This gave him a chance, too, to see that Isabel's cab from the station was now coming lopingly up the street. He looked from it to her.

"Oh—oh," she choked, "do ev-er-thing you can think of to hurry me. It wasn't enough—enough for you to express your willingness to help me pack—"

"Isabel!" he said, trying to keep his voice from going up into a falsetto. "If I had thought, after being married to you for more than three—"

"Yes!" she cried—and her voice attained the falsetto at one leap. "And if I had thought after these three years—if I had had the first idea that all of a sudden in one month—yes, in little more than two weeks you wouldn't only have lost all the love you once pretended—but would be looking about for ways to show your contempt for me! Oo—hoo—hoo—hoo—hoo—hoo—hoo!" She rushed for the cab, and pulled the door to after her.

It was Talbot S. who had once more to speed the parting guest by giving the indignant-visaged Jehu his driving orders.

He went back into the hall. "Ah—ah, Bertha," he said, "Mrs. Smith and I are going away for—for a few days—a little visit, you know. You can just order whatever you need to run along on in the meantime. And if you'd be good enough to send on any mail coming for Mrs. Smith to Mrs. Willa Cameron, Ridgewood—"

"An' does yourrs go there, too, sir?" asked Katy with a face rent by commiseration.

"No," said Talbot S. "No. Not—not at once." He got himself upstairs and began to put together what things his man's feeble imagination told him he might possibly need. When he was doing this it occurred to him that he could have saved at least a few shreds of his self-respect by telling Katy that his mail should, of course, be redirected to the office.

All three were awaiting him when he came downstairs again.

"And how long did ye say ye'd be away, sir?" asked Katy again. "For we'll be ahl women alone here now."

"Oh, not long—not long, really. I—I'll let you know later. Mrs. Smith will let you know."

"Begobs," said Katy, "she's let us know already! She says she's never comin' back at ahl, at ahl!"

V.

Some ten days after the foregoing cyclone Mrs. Willa Cameron, by the exercise of incalculable degrees of patience and diplomacy, had succeeded in once more getting the Talbot Smiths together in that little home of hers in Ridgewood. She had even made it plain to Isabel, now materially enlightened, that the entrance of the masculine coefficient into the servant problem might be the best thing in the world, especially as that masculine coefficient had expressed his limitless unwillingness to have anything more whatever to do with it. In fact, Isabel had softened so far as to admit that one could not quarrel with the service Bertha, Regina and Katy had given them; she had seen that they promised well in the beginning. And if Talbot chose to change his mind and co-operate with her—

They had got so far, indeed, that Mrs. Cameron was again able to enter into it. She showed them what was really the greatest point of all; they had the chance at last to enter their house with the feeling of masters. And now, if they would just take a little week's run down to Palm Beach in which to get right with each other completely—

She was interrupted by the arrival of the afternoon mail. It contained a letter for "Mr. T. Smith, care of Mrs. T. Smith, please forward."

If the superscription was in the hand of Bertha, it was plainly old Katy's hand which had penned the letter itself. It ended as follows:

An after all your kindness were not wantin to go mind. But two doors away was bruk inty a chuesday, and were all wimmen together, and if your not back by tomorrow youll have to take this as notiss for Saturday night.

There was a long pause—it might have been called a three-fold pause.

"Oh—h—" said Isabel at length, "if they feel that way about it, Talbot, I suppose it'd be wisest for us to go back at once."

Next Week, **THE VALLEY OF OBLIVION**

By
Mary Roberts Rinehardt